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US aid proposal could worsen violence in El Salvador

Neoliberal reforms and security funding will not ease the poverty and violence fueling child migration

April 27, 2015 2:00AM ET

by [Lauren Carasik](#) @LCarasik

March was El Salvador's most violent month in at least a decade. At least 481 people were killed in the nation of 6 million, edging out neighboring Honduras as the most violent country outside of a war zone. The violence follows the unraveling of a fragile gang truce signed in 2012, which coincided with a dramatic decline in killings while it lasted.

The White House aims to spend \$1 billion in the next year through the [Alliance for Prosperity in the Northern Triangle](#) plan to address the region's economic deprivation, insecurity and instability — the primary drivers of child migration from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras.

However, civil society groups have voiced alarm over the proposed aid package's focus on private and foreign investment. In an [open letter](#) to President Barack Obama and regional leaders on April 10, 80 organizations said the plan's emphasis on large-scale development projects designed without community participation would exacerbate, not ease, poverty and violence in the region. The groups also denounced the militarization of the war on drugs, which has given rise to systematic human rights abuses; the militarized policing of regional borders, which violates the rights of refugees fleeing violence [during transit](#); and their harsh treatment in the United States.

The groups are right to be apprehensive. While the region desperately needs investments in security, development and social programs, Obama's plan offers a misguided solution. If Washington is prepared to commit resources to ameliorating bleak conditions in the region, it should ditch past policy approaches that have only fueled inequality and violence and instead develop a

comprehensive plan in consultation with the marginalized groups most directly affected by insecurity and poverty.

History of abuse and impunity

The region is not monolithic: Each country in the Northern Triangle confronts a specific set of challenges that reflect different political, economic and historical realities. In Honduras and Guatemala, the concerns about militarization are heightened by an already grave climate of human rights abuses. In El Salvador, though the use of state violence to repress social movements has declined significantly since the 2009 elections, the militarization of civilian policing remains risky. The recent [announcement that Salvadoran police](#) should not fear consequences when using their weapons in the line of duty paves the way for abuse and impunity — an especially alarming development in a country with vivid memories of state-sponsored death squads. The [newly created](#) rapid-response military battalions for citizen security are also a concern.

The crises in the Northern Triangle countries have historical and transnational roots. El Salvador's gang violence owes its genesis to the country's bloody civil war in the 1980s in which the U.S.-backed military committed gross human rights violations in its campaign against leftist guerrillas. Many terrorized civilians fled to the U.S., where expatriates formed gangs to protect themselves from those already present on the streets of Los Angeles.

Aggressive U.S. deportation policies landed many of the gang members back in El Salvador, which lacked the capacity to demobilize them. Their ranks soon proliferated in the country's most marginalized and impoverished communities as well as in prisons, where populations swelled after the implementation of *mano dura* (iron fist) approach to policing in the early 2000s, which targeted gang members with harsh penalties.

Obama's prosperity plan for Central America relies largely on strategies that have proved damaging to the welfare, security and dignity of the region's impoverished people.

El Salvador's President Salvador Sánchez Cerén has been hamstrung in efforts to implement progressive economic and social policies by inadequate resources, a polarized electorate and virulent opposition from the still-entrenched right wing elites. He now faces intense pressure to revert to previous policies of heavy-handed crackdowns because of the rising body count and public disapproval of negotiating with the gangs, though he recognizes that harsh policies antagonize them. In January he announced the ambitious \$2 billion [Safe El Salvador](#) plan, a comprehensive initiative that encompasses violence prevention and social programs as well as institutional reforms to address low prosecution rates.

Sánchez Cerén even won some conservative support for his prevention-focused plan. But the difficulty in coalescing community support for his proposal was highlighted when the National Association of Private Enterprise, the country's leading pro-business organization, [hired former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani](#) in December to provide advice on security and justice issues. The tensions were reinforced by the involvement of Giuliani, whose broken-windows approach to policing in New York — which aggressively punished minor infractions to deter serious crime — remains controversial.

The security component of the U.S. aid plan purports to bolster community-based policing, violence prevention and educational programs in concert with what the Salvadoran government has already outlined. With robust community input and rigorous monitoring, this approach has the potential to make a measurable difference.

But the plan also includes major increases for many drug war programs that have militarized the region's security forces to the detriment of human rights. This could undermine any positive outcomes from the prevention-oriented programs. Previous measures, such as Washington's funding for the construction of

confinement cells at the high-security Zacatecoluca prison, have been counterproductive. Experts cite the recent transfer of 50 gang leaders to such cells as a key factor in the explosion of violence.

Neoliberal reforms

Washington has shown little willingness to support El Salvador's autonomy and priorities, instead pushing the country to adopt neoliberal reforms, conditioning development aid on the country's adoption of austerity, free trade and privatization measures. The State Department has sounded [its displeasure](#) with El Salvador's support for the unified regional opposition to Washington's sanctions on Venezuela, noting that it could jeopardize the aid.

The Millennium Challenge Corp., a U.S. foreign aid agency created by Congress in 2004, mandated that El Salvador to adopt measures to "[promote a business-friendly environment](#)" and court private investment. This includes efforts to privatize public programs such as education and health care as well as community resources, including water, though the government has so far resisted privatizing these services. Previous assurances that neoliberal policies such as the Central American Free Trade Agreement would facilitate development and economic opportunity have [failed to pan out](#).

The majority of the funding for the plan will come from the Inter-American Development Bank and other multilateral development banks. But past projects in the region [funded by these institutions](#) have been marred by forced displacement and egregious human rights abuses, including massacres of civilians.

Still, it is difficult to categorically reject aid that could, if appropriately deployed, ameliorate abject suffering. But Obama's prosperity plan relies largely on strategies that have proved damaging to the welfare, security and dignity of the region's impoverished people. And Washington's track record offers no reason to believe that the positive aspects of the plan would be administered with the robust community participation and careful oversight necessary for its success.

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The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera America's editorial policy.